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ABSTRACT

Commentary on the relationship of culture study and language instruction focuses on: (1) educational goals of current language programs, (2) the relationship between language study and university structure, and (3) observations concerning instructional personnel. The author concludes by urging a realistic appraisal of goals and institutional situations which require, he suggests, greater emphasis on language and extra-literary culture studies. (RL)

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COMMENTARY

THE PLACE OF CULTURE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION: A PRACTICAL VIEW

THEODORE ALAN SACKETT

The subject of the place of culture in college foreign language instruction continues to be discussed widely by theorists and teachers, in professional journals, and in scholarly groups. This meeting's emphasis on theory *and practice* offers an important opportunity to assess our problems with today's compelling realities in view. I propose to examine the following aspects of our theme: the goals of current programs, the relationship between language study and university structure, and the nature of instructional personnel. On the basis of these considerations a proposal for language programs with cultural content will be offered.

I shall leave to others the task of studying what culture as related to language is, first, because we now have a considerable body of illuminating discourse on the subject; and second, because the matter of *how* culture can be integrated into our programs is more critical than the precision with which we formulate definitions. Nelson Brooks' article, "Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom,"[1] is very useful for the task of defining culture and understanding why its various components constitute important correlatives of language study. His five categories (biological growth, personal refinement, literature and the fine arts, patterns of living, and the sum total of a way of life) comprise suggestive lists of logical adjuncts to language comprehension. But no matter how valid and promising his proposals may be, they can have no *practical* meaning if we do not place them in the *concrete* context of today's university.

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Brooks illustrates convincingly that there are many important aspects of culture related to language *besides* literature. Yet we find that at least in most universities, virtually the only cultural values purposefully integrated into programs are literary. This phenomenon may be explained by considering who studies languages in college and *why*. Except in a few mainly private universities which require foreign language proficiency as an entrance requirement, it is a fact that the immense majority of those engaged in college language work do so at the beginning or intermediate levels. They study languages because they must do so, and very few continue beyond the minimal required levels.

It is in the context of these elementary and intermediate "required" courses that the seemingly eternal polemic concerning "language versus lit-

[1]*Foreign Language Annals* (I, iii, 204-217), March, 1968.

erature" arises. Discussions of this topic invariably produce much controversy. I believe, however, that whether participants realize it or not, the insistence on introducing literature in courses whose purpose is to satisfy a "language" requirement is based on the following: many of us seem to believe that the study of language and extra-literary culture *alone* is not enough to justify investment of university time. We imply by our actions that only through literature is it possible to communicate the uniqueness, national points of view, and customs of the countries whose languages we teach. We also seem to think that only contact with the *best* writers, the *greatest* works, and the most lofty philosophical and esthetic ideas produced by a culture justifies foreign language study on humanistic grounds.

I believe that all of the above premises are incorrect. As successful teachers know, when aspects of language beyond grammar are stressed, such as the emotional realities underlying the meaning of an idiomatic expression, or why it would be ridiculous to use the "Tu" instead of the "Ud." form in a *living, real* situation, or the socio-historical factors accounting for the discrepancy between English and foreign versions of a similar proverb, we are dealing with facets that account for much of the humanistic value of language study. Furthermore, we find that the introduction of literature is unsuccessful in motivating students to continue beyond required levels of language study. Most of those who proceed to the third year do so because interest in language or literature *predates* their presence in our university courses.

The introduction of literature near the end of the second year changes fundamentally the original goals and methodology of our programs. In high school and at the elementary college level, language has been the focus. Oral drills, writtten exercises, and other programmed devices have made possible a graded progression towards linguistic knowledge. Suddenly, at the intermediate stage, exercises are often abandoned, language ceases to be the chief matter of concern, and goals become primarily translation or fact-seeking. Instead of continuing to develop the skills at which students have labored, the level of difficulty is *suddenly* and *radically* increased.

Worse still, with little or no preparation, students must substitute formal and thematic literary values for linguistic matters. It is not uncommon to find situations in which the zeal to justify language study by introducing literature of the highest quality causes instructors to resort to extensive lectures or discussions in English in order to compensate for having removed students so completely from their element. The next step would be to substitute classes on foreign culture *in English*. At this point it becomes clear that if we cannot devise ways to combine language and culture in a meaningful and *practical* manner, then, as foreign language teachers, we have no claim upon student time.

Another consequence of changing linguistic goals to literary ones in the

second year concerns the plight of those who are motivated to continue *beyond* requirements. Since third-year students bring with them a high level of interest, and, one would presume, considerable resources of language experience, it would be logical to suppose that at this stage, all aspects of culture including literature could profitably be combined with language. Yet, experience indicates that the language resources of third-year students are limited in far too many instances. At an earlier stage of training, usually in their college work, cultural (usually literary) materials have been intruded upon linguistic development, retarding or even halting it altogether.

We might ask at this juncture how we ever came to believe that it was possible to prepare intermediate-level students for so sophisticated and complex an element of culture as literature. I believe this, of all factors mentioned thus far, is the most closely related to the changing nature of universities. In part, our error is probably based on reminiscences of a largely mythical "golden age" of college language instruction. We know for sure that there was an era (confirmed by crusty catalogues in libraries) when our discipline was one of the cornerstones of a humanistic education. I need not emphasize extensively that times have changed. We know that quantitatively foreign languages are no longer the indispensable element of a liberal education they once were. Students are expected to divide their time among large numbers of disciplines in the arts and sciences. We also know that the student's world has changed; the effort he can devote to any single discipline is lessened by innumerable related and extra-curricular activities that demand his time.

Together with these factors, we must recognize the omnipresent reality that universities are *not really* the best places to begin and pursue the mastery of foreign tongues. We know we can teach most individuals to manipulate certain language skills with considerable ability in an intensive-training program such as that of the Peace Corps. But we cannot dream of making the same progress within the university's unbending structure: 3-4 hours per week (as an average), once a day, with interruptions for vacations and holidays. In short, it would be intelligent for us to change the goals of our programs to conform to circumstances of institutional and student limitations. We should *not* aim for literary dimensions of culture if the language training we can provide will not allow us to reach that far in two years.

The final aspect of current circumstances I shall consider is, paradoxically, the most important and least discussed one. Of all the facets of language study which have changed radically in recent years, none is more obvious or critical than the nature of teaching personnel. Brooks' laudable suggestions for useful combinations of language and culture are *meaningless* if a knowledgeable, experienced instructor is not present in the college classroom. The situation is *not,* as he implies, that formulators of language programs are unaware of the benefits of combining language and extra-literary culture.

Successful teachers at *all* levels have *always* been able to exploit the possibilities he cites.

Today, the majority of instructors in the most critical years of college work are graduate assistants. It is often stated that "some of the best teaching in the university is done by graduate sudents." If by "best" we mean the best-intentioned or the most enthusiastic, the statement might be true. But the adjective "best" does *not* mean the most experienced, knowledgeable, or controlled teaching. I must conclude that most graduate assistants, well-intentioned as they are, cannot be expected to go beyond controlling the *linguistic* aspects of their subject matter. Many of them have not traveled in the country of the language they teach nor have they had significant residence in the milieu of that language. Making teachers aware of the advantages of exploiting culture will not suffice; it will be necessary to devise curricula and materials which are cultural in content.

Some might suggest that through careful planning, training programs, and supervision of graduate assistants, we might improve the possibilities for teaching culture. But reality indicates that with these devices we can only hope to improve the linguistic part of student teaching. Assistants have no lack of interest in adding cultural dimensions to classes. On the contrary, in the zeal to communicate their enthusiasm for the work that most interests them, they often convert second-year classes into literature courses. They do this in ignorance of the fact that students often have no interest or experience in this area, and the linguistic results are almost always disastrous.

The following, then, are my conclusions. With our large captive audience in mind, we must not, in the zeal to justify ourselves, seek to substitute culture of *any* kind for our chief goal, language. Furthermore, there must be no tampering with a systematic sequence of instruction, for if we do so, we will sacrifice the normal linguistic growth of the people about whom we are especially concerned: the minority who will continue beyond the requirements. We do not want students to feel, as they all too often do, that at the *first, second,* and *third* year levels of college study, they are beginning anew each time the examination of elementary matters they should have already learned. We must recognize the nature of our institutional structures, the quantitative status of language study in the total curriculum and in student time. We should consider the less-than-ideal circumstances of college instruction, and in this context determine realistically how much we can expect to accomplish. Finally, we must come to grips with the most compelling problem, our dependence on inexperienced graduate students.

In view of these realities, I offer the following suggestions for college language courses reinforced with culture. Bearing in mind my premise that only the pursuit of language knowledge justifies language requirements, I propose that linguistic endeavors, whether concerned with grammar, structure, vocabulary, oral-aural skills, or reading and writing, be always

the central focus of our aims. To guarantee that this be so, materials employed at all stages of the requirement-level years should be selected primarily in consideration of whether they complement our linguistic goals. This procedure will help to alleviate the problem of the assistant's lack of time *or ability* to devise good exercises and conduct systematic reviews. We should no longer select subject matter on the basis of intrinsic interest or literary-cultural values alone.

Commencing with the first college semester, we should employ subject matter that combines language with facets of extra-literary culture which are *readily perceptible* to students. In consonance with my proposal to aim for the *possible,* we should cease selecting introductory reading materials based on literary merit and sophistication. As in any individual's initial reading experience in his *native* language, students should begin at the beginning. This does not mean that we need to insult them with puerile materials, but it does entail starting with extremely elementary forms and proceeding patiently to more difficult ones. If, in a given program, it seems possible to arrive in the second year at a level where literature can be introduced without an immoderate acceleration of linguistic complication, I suggest, with our teaching personnel in view, that only those works be used whose literary-cultural values are easily accessible and require little explanation.

In conclusion, I am asking that we consider the implantation of a program of college language study which pursues from beginning to end the same goals, and which considers the basic realities of our institutional situations. Some may protest that my suggestions would constitute a lowering of standards and goals. *On the contrary,* by placing greater emphasis on language and extra-literary culture and enabling students to accomplish more, I believe we will create *more* interest in continuing beyond required levels. And even for those who go no farther, we will be making the best contribution our province of knowledge can offer, *in these circumstances,* toward the development of humanistic values.

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